

COVER ESSAY

Anti-tobacco poster in Korea – free to import, free to quit

Kwang Mo Chung

How many Koreans are still smoking? All studies indicate that the smoking rate among Koreans is extremely high, and in the case of male adults it is a stunning 70%. A similarly alarming phenomenon is that smoking among young boys and girls has jumped sharply in recent years; one study shows that 45% of all male students in the 3rd year class of high schools smoke.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, deaths from malignant neoplasms have increased steadily, with the death rate now double what it was 10 years ago. Likewise, deaths from lung cancer are climbing rapidly, and in males that death rate is four times higher than that of 10 years ago. Can there be any doubt that the reason for these increases is the higher smoking rate?

Beginning in the early 1980s, various groups – most notably the consumer associations, physicians, religious leaders, school teachers, and journalists – brought to the attention of the public-at-large the harmful outcome of smoking. They also voiced an urgent need to organise an anti-smoking movement. This stimulus resulted in the founding of the Korean Association of Smoking and Health (KASH) in March 1988, but it must be noted that the timing coincided with the forced opening of the Korean cigarette market (along lines experienced previously in Japan and Taiwan) that same year.

Currently, the main goals of the anti-smoking movement in Korea are to bring about a change in the general attitude toward smoking and to create a social atmosphere of non-smoking through heightened public awareness. To this end, clearly, the liberalisation of the Korean cigarette market was a significant setback. And to make matters worse, the forced opening raises some fundamental questions about the true intent of those countries, such as the USA, which had kept insisting on the market liberalisation.

Foreign cigarettes, irrespective of their true origins, are often collectively called “Yankee cigarettes” by Koreans. Consequently, many Koreans equated the opening of the cigarette market with the invasion of American cigarettes, and for this reason the Statue of Liberty was chosen for the poster reproduced on the cover of this issue of *Tobacco Control*. The poster was meant to convey some key mes-

sages: (1) Instead of exporting freedom and democracy, the US is attempting to force upon other countries harmful cigarettes; (2) smoking cigarettes will result in the deterioration of one's health, ending with death; and (3) the act of exporting cigarettes will damage the trust and friendship with the US.

The poster was executed by Professor Do-Ryong Hong of Hong-Ik University, a prominent artist in Korea. In 1990, some 5000 copies were printed and distributed widely throughout Korea with the cooperation of the government, the business sector, schools, and other agencies. In addition, approximately 300 copies were sent abroad to other anti-smoking organisations.

It is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of the campaign in general, and of the poster in particular. From the feedback we have received, we feel that the poster played a key role in increasing public awareness of the problems caused by smoking. Moreover, we believe that some pressure was brought to bear on the US.

Editor's note:

Ms Kwang Mo Chung, the author of this cover essay, conceived the idea for the poster. Since 1979 she has served as president of the Consumers Union of Korea, a group established in 1970 with the purpose of protecting consumers and advocating their rights. Ms Chung has played a key role in introducing and then later in organising the anti-smoking movement in 1985. Her involvement with the movement remains active, and since 1988 she has served as the vice president of KASH and the Asia-Pacific Association for the Control of Tobacco (APACT).

A series of Doonesbury comic strips on US tobacco trade policies is reproduced on pages 68–9. These strips were published in October 1993, shortly after publication of an in-depth article on US tobacco trade activities in Asia in *The New Yorker* (“Opium war redux”, by Stan Sesser, 13 September 1993 issue, pages 78–89).

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